

The Lady of the Mount

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SYNOPSIS.

Comtesse Elise, daughter of the governor of the Mount, has a chance encounter with a peasant boy, "The Mount," a small rock-bound island, stood in vast bay on the northwestern coast of France, and during the time of Louis XVI. was a government stronghold. Develops that the peasant boy was the son of Seigneur Desaurac, nobleman. Young Desaurac determines to secure an education and become a gentleman; sees the governor's daughter depart for Paris. Lady Elise returns after seven years' schooling, and entertains many nobles. Her ladyship dances with strange feverishness, and a call to arms is made in an effort to capture a mysterious Le Seigneur Noir. He escapes. Lady Elise is caught in the "Grand" tide. The Black Seigneur rescues and takes her to his retreat. Elise discovers that her savior was the boy with the fish. Sanchez, the Seigneur's servant, is arrested and brought before the governor. Lady Elise has Sanchez set free. Seigneur and a priest at the "Cockles." Sanchez tells Desaurac that Lady Elise betrayed him, but is not believed. The Seigneur plans to release prisoners at the Mount. Lady Elise pleads with her father to spare the lives of condemned prisoners. Disguised as a peasant, Lady Elise mingles with the people and hears some startling facts. A mysterious Mountebank starts a riot. He is arrested and locked up after making close observations of the citadel, and is afterwards summoned before the governor's daughter. The governor enters the room during the interview with the Mountebank. As a miserable buffoon, the Mountebank is released by order of the governor. Desaurac overpowers guard and dons soldier's uniform. The Seigneur successfully passes guards and finds the "Great Wheel."

CHAPTER XXI.

The Stairway of Silver.

The stillness of the moment that followed was tense; then thickly the young man answered something irrelevant about a clown, a bottle and a loaf; with cap drawn down and half-averted face, he lurched a little forward in the darkness, and the sentinel's weapon fell. "Oh, that's you, is it, Henri?" he said in a different tone, stepping back. "How did you leave the fellow?"

"Eating the bread and calling for more!" As he spoke, the other stopped, swaying uncertainly; above the arch, the wick, ill-trimmed, brightened and darkened to the drafts of air through break and slit of the old lamp; and briefly he awaited a favorable moment, when the flame blew out until almost extinguished; then with hand near sword-hilt, somewhat overbriskly, but in keeping with the part, he stepped toward the arch; through it, and quickly past the sentinel.

"You seem to have been feasting and drinking a little yourself, tonight, comrade?" called out the latter after him. "I noticed it when you went in, and— But aren't you taking the wrong way?" As the other, after starting toward the barracks, straightened, and then abruptly wheeled into the road, running up the Mount.

"Bah!" A moment the young man passed. "Can't a soldier," articulating with difficulty, "go to see his sweetheart without—"

"Eh bien!" The sentinel shrugged his shoulders. "It isn't my business. I think, though, I know where they'll put you tomorrow, when they find out through the guard at the barracks."

To this ominous threat the other deigned no response, only, after the fashion of a man headstrong in insubriety, as well as in affairs of gallantry, continued his upward way; at first, speedily; afterward, when beyond hearing of the man below, with more stealth and as little noise as possible, until the road, taking a sudden angle, brought him abruptly to an open space at the foot of a great flight of stone stairs.

Broad, wide, broken by occasional platforms, these steps, reaching upward in gradual ascent, had designedly, in days gone by, been made easy for broken-down monarchs or corpulent abbots. Also they had been planned to satisfy the discerning eye, jealous of every addition or alteration at the Mount. My lord, the ancient potentate, leisurely ascending in ecclesiastical gown, while conscious of an earthly power reaching even into England, could still fancy he was going up a Jacob's ladder into realms supernatural. Saint Louis, with gaze benignly bent toward the aerial escalier de dentelle of the chapel to the left, might well exclaim no royal road could compare with this inspiring and holy way; nor is it difficult to understand a sudden enchantment here, or beyond, that drew to the rock on three pilgrimages that other Louis, more sinner than saint, the eleventh of his name to mount the throne of France.

But those stones, worn in the past by the footsteps of the illustrious and the lowly, were deserted now, and, for the moment, only the moon, which had escaped from the cloud, exercised there the right of way; looking squarely down to efface time's marks and pave with silver from top to bottom

the flight of stairs. It played, too, on facades, towers and battlements on either side, and, at the spectacle—the disk directly before him—the Black Seigneur, about to leave the dark and sheltering byway, involuntarily paused. Angels might walk unseen up and down in that effulgence, as, indeed, the old monks stoutly averred was their habit; but a mortal intrusion on the argent way could be fraught only with visibility.

To reach the point he had in mind, however, no choice remained; the steps had to be mounted, and, lowering his head and looking down, deliberately he started. As he proceeded his solitary figure seemed to become more distinct; his presence more obtrusive and his echoing footsteps to resound louder. No indication he had been seen or heard, however, reached him; to all appearances espionage of his movements was wanting, and only the saint with the sword at the top of the steeple-guardian spirit of the rock—looked down, as if holding high a gleaming warning of that unwonted intrusion.

Yet, though he knew it not, mortal eye had long been on him, peering from a window of the abbot's bridge spanning the way and joining certain long unused chambers, next to the Governor's palace, with my lady's abode. Against the somber background of that covered passage of granite, the face looking out would still have remained unseen, even had the young man, drawing near, lifted his glance. This, however, he did not do; his eyes, with the pale reflections dancing in them, had suddenly fastened themselves lower; toward another person, not far beyond the bridge; some one who had turned in from a passage on the other side of the overhead architectural link, and had just begun to come down. An old man, with flowing beard, from afar the new-comer looked not unlike one of the ancient Druids that, in days gone by, had lighted and watched the sacred fires of sacrifice in the rock. He, too, guarded his light; but one set in the tall, pewter lamp of the medieval watchman.

"Twelve o'clock and all's—" he began when his glance, sweeping down, caught sight of the ascending figure, and, pausing, he leaned on his staff with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other.

A half-savage exclamation of disappointment was suppressed on the young man's lips; had he only been able to attain that parallelogram of darkness, beneath the abbot's passage, he would have been better satisfied, his own eyes, looking ahead, seemed to say; then gleamed with a bolder light.

"A sword and blade;
A drab and a jade;
All's one to the King's men of the army!"

he began to hum softly, as with a more reckless swing, quickly he went up in the manner of a man assigned some easy errand. At the same time the patriarch slowly and rather laboriously resumed his descent, and just below the bridge, without the bar of shadow, the two came together.

"Think you it is too late for his Excellency, the Governor, to receive a message?" at once spoke up the younger, breaking off in that dashing, but low-murmured, song of the barracks.

"That you may learn from the guard at the palace," was the deliberate answer, as, raising his lamp, the watchman held it full in his questioner's face.

"Thanks! I was going to inquire." As he answered, at the old abbot's window in the bridge above, the face, looking out, bent forward more intently; then quickly drew back. "Good night!"

But the venerable guardian of the inner precinct was not disposed thus lightly to part company. "I don't seem to know you, young man," he observed, the watery, but keen and critical eyes passing deliberately over the other's features.

"No?" Unflinching in the bright glare of the lamp, the seeming soldier smiled. "Do you, then, know all at the Mount—even the soldiers?"

"I should remember even them," was the quiet reply.

"Those, too, but lately brought from St. Dalard?"

"True, true! There may be some of those—" uncertainly.

"No doubt! So if you will lower your lamp, which smells rather vilely—"

"From the miscreants it has smelled out," answered the old man grimly, but obeyed; stood as if engrossed in the recollection his own response evoked; then turned; walked on, and,

a few moments later, his call, suddenly remembered, rang, belated, in the drowsy air: "Twelve o'clock and all's well! A new day, and St. Aubert guard us all!"

A sword and a blade;
A drab and a jade—

The words, scarcely begun, above his breath, died away on the seeming soldier's lips, as the watcher on the bridge, looking down to follow first the departing figure of the old custodian, crossed quickly to the opposite window, and, from this point of vantage, gazed up after the young man rapidly vanishing in the track of the moonlight. A moment the onlooker stood motionless; then, ere the figure, so vividly defined in shine and shimmer, had reached the top of the stairway, made an abrupt movement and swiftly left the window and the passage.

At the head of the steps, which without further incident or interruption, he reached, the Black Seigneur, stepping to the shadow of a small bush against the wall, glanced about him; with knitted brows and the resolute manner of one who has come to some definite conclusion, he left the spot of observation, almost the apex of the Mount, and plunged diverging to the right. From glint and glimmer to darkness unfathomable! For some time he could only grope and feel his way, after the fashion of the blind; fortunately, however, was the path narrow; although tortuous, fairly well paved, and no serious mishap befell him, even when he walked forward regardlessly, in feverish haste, beset with the conviction that time meant all in all, and delay the closing of the toils and the failure of a desperate adventure. Several times he struck against the stones; once fell hard, but picked himself up; went on the faster, only, after what seemed an interminable period, to stop.

"Am I, can I be mistaken?" But the single star he could see plainest from the bottom of the deep alley, and to which he looked up, answered not the fierce, half-muttered question; coldly, enigmatically it twinkled, and, half-running, he continued his way, to emerge over suddenly into a cooler well of air, and—what was more to be welcomed!—an outlook whereof the details were in a measure dimly shadowed forth.

On one side the low wall obscured not the panorama below—a ghost-like earth fading into the mist, and nearer, the roof of the auberge des voleurs, a darkened patch on the slope of the rock; but in this direction the man hardly cast a glance. Certain buildings ahead, austere, Norman in out-

near a great wall. At once the young man put out his hand to the door; tried it; pushed it back and entered. Before him a wide opening looked out at the sky, framing a multitude of stars, and from the bottom of this aperture ran a strand, or rope, connecting with an indistinct object—a great wheel, which stood at one side!

CHAPTER XXII.

The Whirling of the Wheel.

As old as church or cloister, the massive wheel of the Mount had, in the past, played prominent part in the affairs of succeeding communities on the rock. It, or the hempen strand it controlled, had primarily served as a link between the sequestered dwellers, and the flesh-pots and material comforts of the lower world. Through its use had my lord, the abbot, been ever enabled to keep full the mighty wine-bottles of his cellars; to provide good cheer for the tables of the brethren, and to brighten his cold stone interiors with the fresh greens of Flemish tapestry, or the sensuous hues of rugs and fabrics from seraglio or mosque. Times less ancient had likewise claimed its services, and even in recent years, by direction of his Excellency, the Governor, had it occasionally been used for the hoisting of goods, wares, or giant casks, overcumber-some for men or mules.

Toward this simple monkish contrivance, the summit's rough lift, or elevator, wherein serfs or henchmen had walked like squirrels in a cage to bring solace to generations of isolated dwellers, the Black Seigneur had at first stepped impetuously; then stopped, hardly breathing, to look over his shoulder at the door that had been left unfastened. An involuntary question flashing through his brain—the cause of this seeming carelessness—found almost immediate answer in his mind, and the certainty that he stood not there alone—a consciousness of some one else, near, became abruptly confirmed.

"What are you doing, soldier?" A voice, rough, snarling, drew swiftly his glance toward a presence, intuitively divined; an undersized, grotesque figure that had entered the place but a few moments before and now appeared from behind boxes and casks where he had been about to retire to his mattress in a corner.

"What do you want?" repeated this person, the anger and viciousness on his distorted features, revealed in the moonlight from the large opening, like that of some animal unwarrantedly disturbed.

"You, landlord of the thieves' inn!" And inaction giving way to movement

known agility of his kind, he scratched, kicked and had managed to get the other's hand in his mouth, when, making an effort to throw off that clinging burden, the Black Seigneur dashed the dwarf's head violently against the wooden support of the place. At once all belligerency left the hunchback, and, releasing his hold, he sank to the ground.

An instant the intruder regarded the inert form; then, going to the door, latched and locked it with a key he found inside. Having thus in a measure secured himself from immediate interruption without—for anyone trying the door would conclude the wheel-room vacant, or that the dwarf slept there or in the store-house beyond—the Black Seigneur walked to the aperture, and reaching up, began to pay out the rope from a pulley above. As he did so, with feet braced, he leaned over to follow in its descent a small car along the almost perpendicular planking from the mouth of the wheel-room to the rocks, several hundred feet below.

A sudden slackening of the rope—assurance that the car, at the end of the line, had reached the loading-spot below without the fortifications—and the young man straightened; in an attitude of attention, stood listening. But the stillness, impregnated only with a faint underbreath, the far-away murmur of water, or the just audible droning of insects near the fig-trees on the rocks, continued unbroken. An impatient frown gathered on his brow; more eagerly he bent forward to gaze down, when through the air a distant sound—the low, melancholy hoot of an owl—was wafted upward.

Upon him at the aperture, this night call, common to the Mount and its environs, acted in magical manner, and swiftly had he stepped toward the wheel, when an object, intervening, stirred; started to stagger to its feet. At once was the young man's first impelling movement arrested; but, thus forcibly drawn from his purpose, he did not long pause to contemplate; his hand, drawing the soldier's sword, held it quickly at the hunchback's throat.

"A sound, and you know what to expect!"

With the bare point at his flesh, Jacques, dully hearing, vaguely comprehending, could, indeed, guess and the fingers he had involuntarily raised to push the bright blade aside, fell, while at the same time any desire to attempt to call out, or arouse the guard, was replaced by an entirely different emotion in his aching brain. Never before had he actually felt that sharp touch—the prelude to the final thrust. At the sting of it, a tremor ran through him, while cowardice also besetting quality, long covered by growl and egotism in his strength and hideousness to terrify, alone shone from his unprepossessing yellow features.

"You were brave enough with the soldiers at your beck!" went on a determined voice whose ironical accents in no wise served to alleviate his panic. "When you had only a mountebank to deal with! But get up!" contemptuously. "And," as the hunchback obeyed, his crooked legs shaking in the support of his misshapen frame, "into the wheel with you!"

"The wheel!" stammered the dwarf.

"Why—what?"

"To take a little of your own medicine! Pardi! What a voluble fellow! In with you, or—"

With no more words the hunchback, staggering, hardly knowing what he did, entered the ancient abbot's machine for hoisting. But as he started to walk in the great wheel at the side of his captor, a picture of the past—the times he, himself, had forced prisoners to the wheel, stimulating with jeer and whip—arose mockingly before him, and the incongruous present seemed, in contrast, like a black waking dream.

That it was no dream, however, and that the awakening would never occur, he well knew, and malevolently though fearfully he eyed the rope, coming in over the pulley at the aperture; to be wound around and around by a smaller wheel, attached to the larger, and—drawing up what?

An inkling of the sort of merchandise to be expected, under the circumstances, could but flash through his mind, together with a more vivid consciousness of the only course open for him—to cry out, regardless of consequences! Perhaps he might even have done so, but at that instant—as if the other had read the thought—came the cold touch of a bare blade on his neck; and with a sudden chill, the brief heroic impulse passed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Kinder Skittish.

A good old mammy of ante-bellum days went into a shoe store and asked for "a pair of ever-day shoes—small tens." The clerk selected a pair of men's heavy plow shoes for her and she seated herself to try them on. The clerk remained standing in front of her. She glanced up and asked: "Honey, is you all gwine to stan' dere while I tries 'em on?"

The clerk answered: "Why, no, auntie; I'll move on if you wish it."

She said: "Please do, honey, 'cause I see white folks raised and I see kinder skittish."—Chicago Post.



"Twelve O'Clock, and All's—"

line, absorbed his attention to the exclusion of all else, and toward them, with steps now alert and noiseless, he stole; past a structure that seemed a small salle des gardes whose window afforded a view of four men nodding at a table within; across a space to another passage, and thence to a low door at the far corner of a little triangular spot, alongside the walk and

on the intruder's part, a knife that had flashed back in the hand of the hunchback, with his query, was swiftly twisted from him and kicked aside, while a scream of mingled pain and rage became abruptly suppressed. Struggling and writhing like a wildcat, Jacques proved no mean antagonist; with a strength incredible for one of his size, supplemented by the well-